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INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 3773
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 2285
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 1288
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0685
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1945
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 5961
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4228
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 2155
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
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SUBJECT: CHILE MEDIA REPORT - FEBRUARY 14-17

Leading Stories

1. Chilean dailies ran extensive coverage of reactions to Fidel Castro's column published after he met with President Bachelet, in which he endorsed Bolivia's maritime demand for access to the sea. Front-page news also highlighted a helicopter crash that killed 12 fire fighters who were being transported between blazes.

U.S.-Related News

2. Douglas Tompkins joined the debate on the relocation of Chaiten, damaged by last year's volcanic eruption. Tompkins proposed rebuilding the northeast part of Chaiten, rather than relocating it to Fandango. He believes that since not all of Chaiten's inhabitants are likely to return, this proposal makes more sense, in addition to the fact that it would be less costly than rebuilding all public services. The mayor of Chaiten, Pedro Vasquez, is promoting the relocation to Fandango and has the government's support (El Mercurio, conservative, influential newspaper-of-record, circ. 129,000, 2/15).

3. Labor Minister Claudia Serrano met with Wal-Mart and D and S CEOs to discuss local labor legislation. The government received a report drafted by a Chamber of Deputies investigative committee that said that Wal-Mart has a worldwide policy of discouraging unions. Reportedly, Serrano reminded the multinational of Chile's labor legislation and her role to ensure compliance with those laws. Wal-Mart spokesman in Bentonville, Kevin Gardner, responded, "Our relations with regard to unions vary from country to country. If the unions exist, we work with them" (La Tercera, conservative, independent, circ. 101,000, 2/15).

Comments on Fidel's Column

4. After his meeting with President Bachelet, Fidel Castro wrote a column endorsing Bolivia's demands for a passage to the sea, triggering criticism across the political spectrum. Fidel then wrote a second column in which he labels Chile's UDI opposition party "a rancid oligarchy." Following is a summary of reactions to the columns:

-- Congressman Patricio Walker (DC): "Fidel has a double standard, because on the one hand he asks that no one interfere in Cuba's internal affairs while on the other he does not hesitate expressing his opinion about an issue that concerns other countries" (La Segunda, conservative, afternoon circ. 33,000, 2/13).

-- Congressman Alberto Cardemil (RN) is: "enraged" to see "Chile's interests exposed and compromised abroad by a trip that had no other goal but to revere the Cuban dictatorship" (La Segunda, 2/13).

-- DC President Juan Carlos Latorres: "He (Fidel) can think and write whatever he wants, but this is of no international significance to Chile" (La Segunda, 2/13).

- PRI, Jaime Mulet said this shows "La Moneda's inexperience in diplomacy" (La Segunda, 2/13).

-- Foreign affairs Under Secretary Alberto Van Klaveren said Castro's remarks were "a personal opinion of a former head of state. A historic interpretation of an issue that is long past" (La Segunda, 2/13).

-- Opposition alliance presidential candidate Sebastian Piera said: "The lesson here is that international relations must be driven by state interests and not by ideology or personal sympathies (La Tercera 2/14).

-- PRI presidential candidate Adolfo Zaldivar: "Fidel Castro's remarks are an insult and an offense to Chile and a crooked interpretation of history. I hope the President publicly condemns them" (El Mercurio, 2/16).

- MAS presidential candidate Alejandro Navarro: "I fully share Fidel's reflections" (El Mercurio, 2/16).

-- Senator Hernan Larrain (UDI): "He (Fidel) intervened in Chile's internal affairs and created an international embarrassment for Chile, which shows that the presidential trip was a grave international policy mistake" (El Mercurio, 2/16).

-- Senator Carlos Ominami (PS): "His (Fidel's) reference to Bolivia is part of the former president's ideas and obsessions" (El Mercurio 2/16).

-- Senator Roberto Muñoz (PPD): "(Foreign Minister Alejandro) Foxley must respond to Fidel Castro's interventionist remarks as soon as possible" (El Mercurio, 2/16).

-- UDI President Juan Antonio Coloma: "This is part of a campaign of the international left whereby its leaders --Castro and Chavez -- are forcing Chile to give up part of its territory" (El Mercurio 2/16).

-- Senator Sergio Romero (RN): "Everything indicates that we are in the worst possible international scenario. This should end with a very clear and strong stance. Failing to do this means we have no foreign policy (La Tercera, 2/15).

-- Congressman Jorge Burgos (DC) does not believe that Fidel's article was "just a personal expression," adding that the trip to Cuba was a government foreign policy mistake (La Tercera, 2/15).

-- Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley: "We will not let an opinion column written by a retired individual ruin what has been a good visit" (La Tercera, 2/14).

-- Foreign Affairs Under Secretary Alberto Van Klaveren: "We see this as Fidel Castro's personal opinion as former Cuban head of state" (La Tercera, 2/14).

-- President Bachelet: "At the conclusion of this visit, I can express my belief that our friendship and mutual trust have been strengthened" (La Tercera, 2/14).

-- Congressman Patricio Walker (DC): "This trip was an absolute failure.... Fidel Castro used us" (La Tercera, 2/14).

-- Congressman Jorge Tarud (PPD): "These kinds of provocative remarks cannot be ignored. And in diplomacy there are many ways to make this be felt" (La Tercera, 2/14).

-- Senator Sergio Romero and Congressmen Cristian Monckeberg (RN) said the government should recall Chile's Ambassador to Cuba for an explanation (La Tercera, 2/14).

Bolivia-Cuba

15. Bolivian President Evo Morales thanked Fidel for his article. Morales, however, did not increase the controversy by stating that Chile and Bolivia had "taken important steps" on this topic. "We feel we have regained trust between the governments of Bolivia and Chile (La Tercera, 2/14; El Mercurio, 2/17).

16. On the morning when the Fidel's first column was published, Foreign Minister Foxley met with his Cuban counterpart to ask the Cuban government clarify that Fidel's column did not represent Havana's position. Foxley said that neither Bachelet and Raul Castro nor he and his counterpart discussed the issue of Bolivia's maritime demand, adding that Fidel's column was written from a historical perspective (La Tercera, 2/14).

17. Just minutes after landing in Santiago, Bachelet told the press

that she had expressed to Raul Castro her "disapproval" of Fidel's column. Her remarks to the press are a deep contrast with the silence she kept during her stay in Havana after the publication of Fidel's column (La Tercera, 2/14).

¶18. Evo Morales and Bachelet have made significant diplomatic efforts to keep Bolivia's maritime demand a bilateral issue. The Foreign Ministry's concern is that Fidel's columns will set these efforts back, by encouraging Nicaragua, Venezuela, and even Bolivia to take a different stance (El Mercurio, 2/14).

¶19. The controversy caused by Fidel Castro's column shows the deeper differences that exist between Raul and Fidel over the road that Cuba must follow in international policy (La Tercera, 2/15).

¶110. While the opposition looks for excuses to criticize Bachelet's trip to Cuba, the President worked. Proof of that are the series of cooperation agreements signed by the Biotechnology and Genetics Engineering Center with Chile's International Cooperation Agency, and the respective Ministries of Agriculture (La Nacion, government-owned, editorially independent, 2/16).

¶111. Bachelet's visit to Cuba strengthened the political dialogue with Cuba on an array of subjects, including human rights. President Bachelet's assessment of the trip is that it was positive. (La Nacion, 2/15).

Editorials on Cuba

¶12. "The state visit to Cuba has been politicized by Fidel Castro, who used the Chilean President's visit to promote his unsuccessful ideological agenda, rather than to strengthen bilateral ties as the Chilean delegation intended.... But beyond spoiling the purpose of the President's trip to promote international ties without exclusion, Cuba's interventionist obstinacy calls for Chile to officially respond with determination, and to set the record straight that these repeated interference are unacceptable (El Mercurio, 2/17).

¶13. "By excluding human rights from her visit, President Bachelet missed a great opportunity to show she is impartial in her commitment to human rights (El Mercurio, 2/14).

¶14. Column by Libardo Buitrago: "By touching the subject of Bolivia, Fidel sent Evo Morales a message, which is that he should insist on his demand for a passage to the sea and abandon the talks with Santiago.... The Cuban leader also undermined what Chile was trying to build in the region, with Mexico and Brazil, along the lines of what the Obama administration has labeled 'a new era'.... Cuba was going through one of its best moment in its ties with the region... and Fidel's reflections could very well set all that back (Diario Financiero, 2/16).

¶15. "The foreign policy of the Concertacion governments have always had as a priority Chile's integration within Latin America ... and ties with Havana are no exception.... The President's visit to Cuba is part of that policy of dialogue and diversity... and, in that context, meeting with Cuba's dissidence ... was untimely" (La Nacion, 2/16).

¶16. "Castro intervened in Chilean politics, putting the President (Bachelet) in an uncomfortable position.... We did not know and were not expecting any significant outcome from this trip, which concluded with an incident which was both uncomfortable and offensive for Chile, especially for the President" (la Segunda, 2/14).

SIMONS